# Modern Languages as an academic discipline: where next?

## Five years of scholarship and collaboration: LanGW4

### Introduction

This guest-edited Special Issue of *Language, Culture and Curriculum* brings together some of the keynotes that have framed, and set the tone for, the community of practice that is LanGW4 (https://www.langw4.com). A scion of GW4, an existing consortium between four leading HE institutions in the South West of the UK – Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter –, LanGW4 was born in 2014 out of a wish to redress a deep-rooted and widespread perception: that Modern Languages can hardly be considered an academic discipline; unlike other social sciences and area studies, which manage just fine as providers of subject knowledge whilst developing students' transferable skills – a *sine qua non* of the employability agenda – languages have sadly been relegated to the status of merely another one of these skills, thus losing intellectual credibility in academic institutions. The perception that language teaching is not grounded in solid scholarship and research is, unfortunately, too frequent. LanGW4 is a purposeful attempt to bat away these misconceptions, to facilitate the opportunity for collegial exchange and for exploring in depth the current thinking in our discipline.

Since our foundation, we have organized annual colloquia where Foreign Language teachers from all four institutions exchange good practice and network. Our invited keynote speakers come from outside the LanGW4 community; they are research active scholars working on relevant themes in our discipline. In addition, we have enjoyed the backing of official institutions such as the Chartered Institute of Linguists, Instituto Cervantes, the German Academic Exchange Service or Consejería de Educación; we are aware that we need to find synergies and join forces if we want to reverse our current predicament.

Back in 2014, we were blissfully unaware that a further threat lurked around the corner; at that pre-Brexit time, we had plenty on our plate; we were contending with a decline in the take-up of languages in secondary education, and consequently in HE, plus a disheartening devaluation of our discipline and its practitioners in educational institutions. The UK context

of language learning has been challenging for some time, the GCSE reform in 2004 being undoubtedly a turning point in our fate. The depletion of our pipeline has still not been reversed by subsequent education reforms, such as the introduction of Foreign Languages in primary education from the age of seven, or the new English Baccalaureate, an alternative to GCSEs that comprises the study of a modern language. Writing on the potential of these policies to stave off the decline in language learning, McLelland warns "that these encouraging policy decisions may be scuppered by practical problems, including a serious projected shortage of suitably qualified teachers and the loss of momentum in the transition from primary to secondary school language learning." (McLelland, 2018: pp. 12-13). The significant body of government and academic reports in recent years draw a more detailed picture of the situation. For instance, the report by the British Academy *Languages in the UK: A Call for Action* provides the stark fact that the current take-up of languages at GCSE remains below 50%, down from 2002, when it stood at 76% (https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Languages-UK-2019-academies-statement.pdf [1]). Vidal Rodeiro writes that this downward trend in the study of Foreign Languages can be found in other Anglophone countries, and that, as it is the case in the UK, recent government initiatives have not managed to reverse the situation (Vidal Rodeiro, 2017: p.231-232). She offers various reasons for this, but the following two make, predictably, the top of her list: on the one hand, the decline in language learning is proportional to the spread of English as an international language, fostering an "English is enough" attitude. On the other hand, young people do not see the relevance of language study for the career prospects (Ibid: p. 232).[2]

Brexit has entailed a change of gear: to put it bluntly, it has given a sense of urgency to our mission and made unabashed activists of us. The risks of isolation and complacency in monolingualism are all too real. University language departments are constantly under the scrutiny of a senior management keen to sing the praises of internationalisation, but under pressure to square the account books and therefore unable or unwilling to support the very

[1] For more data on languages in the UK see reports by British Council (2018), *Language Trends 2018: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England survey report*; British Academy (2018), *The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture.*

[2] It is worth noting that Spanish is bucking the trend in the UK. For a comprehensive description of current demand and provision of Spanish in the UK see the following report by Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional (2018), *The teaching of Spanish in the UK: a growing demand*.

discipline that should be the lifeblood of any institutional internationalisation strategy. If we want to survive, language teaching needs to stem the flow towards the monolingual and monocultural mindset that risks spreading and taking hold at this momentous time, when many are understandably confounded by what a post-Brexit UK may look like, and look for reassurance in whatever is the latest soundbite from the political class.

When it comes to quantifying the benefits of language learning, there is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating that languages are an economic asset, good for business, employability, diplomacy and national security (see for instance the British Academy 2016 report *Born Global* on languages and employability https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/born-global.) Roberts et al., in their article powerfully entitled *Monolingualism is the Illiteracy of the Twenty-First Century* contend that "On today's world stage, multilingual skills and cultural competence have taken lead roles in building a future global workforce." (Roberts et al., 2018, p. 116). The authors go on to provide the rationale for, and benefits of, a comprehensive and far-reaching language policy in Utah, USA, which links up all educational stages, from school right up to university. The authors conclude, "Our goal is to eradicate monolingualism, since it leaves our students under-skilled and unrehearsed to star on the stage of a global environment." (Ibid., p. 117).

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As scholars, we are becoming adept at explaining the practical need for languages. Yet, if we focus only on the concrete benefits of language learning, we are selling our discipline short. There is also another side to language learning: the intellectual pleasure, the personal growth and enrichment, the understanding and embracing of "the other". These can be barely measured within the metrics of austerity, but are fundamental to peace and dialogue in this fractious, multicultural, multilingual and very complex globalised world.

Martha Nussbaum, in her impassioned *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, makes a strong case for languages and all humanities within the broad framework of education for world citizenship: "A neglected aspect of learning for world citizenship is foreign language instruction. All students should learn at least one foreign language well. Seeing how another group of intelligent human beings has cut up the world differently, how all translation is imperfect interpretation, gives a young person an essential lesson in cultural humility." (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 90). Her essay is a manifesto, a call to action for the humanities to be given their due credit for the role they have played, and continue to play, in educating democratic citizens. Nussbaum argues that the study of humanities fosters curiosity

and teaches critical thought, empathy and understanding, and that these qualities underpin democracy itself.

On the same line, the Italian scholar and philosopher Nuccio Ordine, in his beautiful essay *The usefulness of the useless* –tellingly also offered as a manifesto –, argues vehemently in favour of any academic discipline or human endeavour that does *not* lead deliberately to any tangible profit. The constant quest for useful and utilitarian knowledge, he contends, can stifle our creativity. He writes "Some knowledge […] can play a fundamental role in the cultivation of the spirit and in the civil and cultural development of humankind. Within this frame of reference, I consider *useful* everything that helps us become better." (Ordine, 2017, pp.1-2. Italics in the original). In very simple terms, Ordine recasts the concept of "usefulness" away from any utilitarian, short-termed understanding of the term. Both Nussbaum and Ordine make the cogent case that it is precisely the academic disciplines which may seem dispensable at times of budget cuts that can have the deepest impact on the individual and society.

Writing on language learning and teaching in an era of globalization, Kramsch posits that, "In the last decades, [the] world has changed to such an extent that language teachers are no longer sure of what they are supposed to teach nor what real world situations they are supposed to prepare their students for." (Kramsch, 2014, p. 296). We would argue that, in our experience, our discipline has always done a lot of soul searching – our syllabi, pedagogical approaches, conceptualizations of standard language, foreign language and the role of the native speaker, to name but a few, have evolved, and continue to be unpicked and critiqued by scholars and practitioners in response to the wider context. Very opportunely, then, the first two articles in the following pages of this Special Issue begin by identifying the contours of our discipline. Pountain proposes a systematic and uncompromising stand on our part; he offers what he loosely calls The Three L's as an effective *aid memoir* to remind us all that we teach so much more than transactional communication. It is a call to be rigorous and set the bar higher, for example enabling students to read and engage with cultural artefacts that can only be decoded through a sound knowledge of the language.

In the next article Foster picks up this theme of what makes us distinctive; he puts our understanding of "global citizenship" against the ropes by reminding the reader that most language learning happens "informally" by migrant communities. In the final section of his article, Foster dares to look to the future. And since a future without technology is impossible

to imagine, he argues that we should beat our drum more loudly and confidently: language teachers have always embraced the latest technologies and incorporated them successfully into their teaching. We are not so good at providing a narrative that explains that technology is *not* a replacement for our teaching skills and us.

The Year Abroad is undeniably one of the strong selling points of our degrees, as well as a very significant learning opportunity for our students. At the time of writing, the uncertainty surrounding the funding of the Erasmus+ scheme following a possible 'no deal' Brexit has left many students "in limbo" (Fazackerley, 2019, *Erasmus scheme in chaos as UK students left in limbo* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/19/erasmus-scheme-chaos-uk-students-limbo-funding-accommodation). Two of our scholars look at this key period of study, offering systematic approaches to the year that many students anticipate with some trepidation, but often end up looking back on with fondness. In his contribution McManus sets out to examine the networks students form while abroad and whether these change over time. Is there any correlation between how these networks evolve, if they do, and students' linguistic development and confidence? In their article Demossier et al. examine students' cultural learning while abroad. They describe a project at the University of Southampton in which students are trained in anthropological and ethnographic methods so that they can engage productively in cultural encounters and be made aware of their own learning. This case study offers an effective example of the fundamental interdisciplinarity of languages.

In the final article, Muñoz-Basols argues for a multilingual approach in the language class to develop learners' plurilingual competence. The author provides a compelling rationale for the use of translation in novel ways that move decisively beyond linguistic mediation between two languages, to encompass learners' plurilingual repertoires. He argues for "connecting the social and educational spaces" by bringing our multilingual and multimodal realities into the language class. The possibilities that translation, arguably the most venerable of all tasks in the language class, offers in this multimodal, multilingual guise are exciting and mark nothing short of a paradigmatic shift.

A final remark we want to make in this introduction to this Special Issue on Modern Languages as an Academic Discipline is that there are significant variations in terms of article length. This seemingly unsystematic approach is an intentional editorial decision for this number. We wanted to let the authors reflect truthfully their keynote address to our community of practice. Any dialogic interaction is bound by its context and its participants,

and a keynote address is a dialogue between peers. Our speakers over the past years have addressed and delved into their specific interests, and have done so in their own style; from the opinion piece style of Foster, musing on possible future scenarios for our discipline, to the more scholarly piece by Muñoz-Basols, including its mini-corpus, these pieces are a snapshot of salient aspects in our discipline. Their interventions are captured here as faithfully as the written transcription of an oral message will allow, with the addition of references and extensive bibliographies.

This volume is LanGW4's two pennies' worth, so to speak, in the ongoing conversation about languages in the UK. It is not our final word, as our conversation, and that of the whole community, needs to continue. From where we stand, it is likely that our educational mission will always go beyond the confines of the classroom to the corridors of policy-making and into the larger community. At a time when nationalism is rearing its ugly head, we make a firm stand in favour of working together and reaching out to the other.

**The editors, Irene Macías and Isabel Moros**

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